CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

§1. The Philosophy of Consciousness as “First Philosophy”

The essential characteristic of modern philosophy, as opposed to ancient and medieval philosophy, consists in no longer focusing upon being and objects in the human soul, but in placing the consciousness of objective being in the foreground of one’s interest and in regarding consciousness as a particular domain. The discovery of consciousness was one of Descartes’ notable achievements, and thereafter consciousness became the principal theme of philosophy.

Descartes did not restrict the cogito ergo sum to being an axiomatic point of departure for a series of deductions, i.e., to the role of an initial premise. At the end of the second of his Meditations, as he summarized the analysis and critique of perception he had just completed, Descartes concluded that every act by means of which one gains knowledge of an external body makes one know consciousness itself “not only with much more truth and certainty, but also with much more distinctness and clearness.”\(^1\) One cannot relate to any extramental object without thereby relating to oneself, that is to say, to one’s mind. As an act by means of which one is conscious of an object is experienced, an act in which the object presents itself and is eventually given as existent, the act of consciousness itself is simultaneously grasped, with added force, as a conscious reality.

All mental acts and processes which suggest, rightly or wrongly, one’s admission of an external thing as existent serve to reinforce the existence

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of the mind itself. Consciousness thus appears as a domain of being contraposed, so to speak, to its objects. Whatever the object with which the mind is occupied, and whatever the manner in which one becomes conscious of it, one is necessarily referred back to the acts in and by means of which one does so; one finds oneself, time and again, in the presence of consciousness, the only domain which resists the universal doubt. The cogito ergo sum must therefore be understood as the expression of the discovery of a domain of primordial being in itself, prior to any other, and alone possessed of indubitable and, in this sense, absolute existence.

The privilege attributed by Descartes to consciousness persists throughout modern philosophy, above all in the classical English school inaugurated by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, and it is carried over into nineteenth-century empiricism. In effect, the thinkers belonging to that school were the first to make fruitful use of Descartes’ great discovery by subjecting consciousness to a systematic investigation.  

2 The reason why this task was passed on from the Cartesians to the empiricists is the mathematical “prejudice,” if one may dare call it that, in which the former were steeped. N. Malebranche, for instance, while maintaining that we know “more distinctly the existence of our soul than the existence of our body and of the bodies around us” (De la recherche de la vérité, Bk. iii, Part ii, Chapter vii, § 4 in Oeuvres Complètes, ed. G. Rodis-Lewis [Paris: J. Vrin, 1962], I, p. 451 [119]), does not however admit that there is “a knowledge of the nature of our soul as perfect as that of the nature of bodies.” (Ibid.) “The Idea that we have of extension is sufficient to make us acquainted with all the possible properties of extension.” (Ibid., §3, p. 450 [117].) Each particular modification of extension, each figure, each movement can and should be conceived of as a variation of the fundamental Idea of extension, as a specific case of an ideal generality, a case encompassed, according to definite laws, under that Idea which guarantees it its possibility as well as its necessity. But it is an altogether different matter with the soul, which is nothing but what Husserl calls a ‘definite’ Mannigfaltigkeit [“a ‘definite’ manifold”] (in Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie, 3rd. ed., ed. K. Schuhmann, in Gesammelte Werke, III-1, Husserliana [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976], p. 135; Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, trans. F. Kersten [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982]; henceforth all references to this work will be cited as Ideen, I, and the pagination given will be that of the original edition, which appears in the margins of both the edition used here and the English translation; the second set of page numbers are those of the translation, because we do not have an Idea of the soul, but know its modifications only “by the inner feeling we have of ourselves” (N. Malebranche, op. cit., §4, p. 451 [119]) or by way of